



PRACTICE GUIDE

Conducting a family needs assessment

A standard response is a child-centred, family-focused response to a notification that provides flexibility and proportionality to assessing and responding to a family's needs, to reduce risk to a child.

A standard response involves:

- planning
- engagement with
 - each subject child
 - the parents and
 - the alleged person responsible
- a safety assessment to determine the child's immediate safety
- a family needs assessment undertaken collaboratively with the child, their parents and the safety and support network
- support coordination, if necessary.

Timely coordination of targeted supports can help families to address needs and make meaningfully change, reducing the likelihood of the child becoming a child in need of protection in the future.

This practice guide specifically focuses on the family needs assessment and support coordination components of the standard response, including ways to maximise children and parents' engagement and participation in the process.

Plan the assessment

Before contacting a parent, plan the family needs assessment including how best to engage the child and their family. Taking the time to plan will help to:

- remain focused on the risks to the child that are to be assessed
- narrow the focus of the needs assessment to ensure proportionality and clarity, while remembering to stay curious and open-minded about the potential for other needs to be identified as the assessment progresses
- maximise the likelihood of participation and engagement in the process
- ensure the most relevant and accurate information is gathered to inform the assessment.

To plan the assessment, ensure that you:

- have reviewed and analysed the child protection history for each subject child, the parent and the alleged person responsible to have a clear understanding of the child's experience to date and the prevalent issues that may place the child at ongoing risk of harm
- understand the notified concerns and the reasons for undertaking the standard response
- consider which family support needs domains may be relevant to explore based on the child protection history and the notified concerns, and what the most pressing needs may be (refer to [Family support needs domains](#))



- have an understanding of the physical and cognitive developmental stages of each subject child, and consider
 - what you would anticipate observing when you engage with them
 - how best to communicate with them
- understand the offers of support that have been made in the past, to which services and how effective these interventions were in achieving meaningful change
- are aware of the child's cultural identity¹, and have
 - sought advice from a culture practice advisor about how best to engage an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family
 - engaged the Family Participation Program in planning the standard response for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child
 - sought cultural knowledge to help plan for the family needs assessment
 - an awareness of your own bias and privilege to understand the lens through which you view information
- have relevant information from other agencies and services who are supporting the child or parents, and consider what role they may have (if any) in the family needs assessment
- consider a co-response with an Assessment and Service Connect provider
- consider involving other professionals, where appropriate (refer to Involvement of other professionals)
- have considered your personal safety.

Engaging the child

Direct engagement with the child about the notified concerns is central to a child-focused assessment. It enables us to 'hear' from them about how their family's functioning may be impacting them and integrate this into our assessment.

When engaging with each subject child be sure to:

- have an awareness of the child's developmental stage, and the cognitive and physical developmental milestones expected to have been achieved
- have direct contact with the child and interact with them in a way that is appropriate for their age, developmental level and ability to communicate
- observe the child's
 - physical and cognitive development
 - behaviour
 - reactions, presentation and interaction with others, including the parent.

Engaging the parents

Use strength-based engagement strategies and an appreciative enquiry approach to establish trust and encourage families to actively participate in the assessment, to build motivation towards change. Active participation may be supported by:

- Being open and transparent about the process from the outset, including
 - the actions that Child Safety needs to take (sighting and engaging all subject children, sighting the home, assessing immediate safety and family needs)
 - what may happen if the family do not agree to the actions Child Safety need to take in response to the notification
 - what will happen if Child Safety identifies immediate danger to the child, or there is greater risk to the child than initially assessed.
- Involving parents in the planning process, including
 - whether they would like an Assessment and Service Connect service to co-respond with Child Safety

¹ For guidance about culturally safe and respectful behaviours when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, refer to the practice guide [Culturally capable behaviours](#).

- whether they consent to a referral to the Family Participation Program, if the child is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child (if this has been agreed with the Family Participation Program)
- who they would like to be present when they meet with Child Safety (such as a support person, people who support them to keep the child safe or a staff member from an agency currently supporting the family)
- where they would like to meet Child Safety, noting that the child's home must be sighted to complete the safety assessment.
- Making parents aware of their right to
 - privacy and confidentiality
 - a support person
 - an independent person, if the child is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child
 - decide whether to participate in the standard response, particularly if the assessment relates to an unborn child².
- Involving parents in decisions about services and supports that are best suited to addressing the family's identified needs.

If a parent is reluctant to engage in a standard response, using an engagement letter can help to explain the process and how they can be supported to participate.

Undertake the family needs assessment

A family needs assessment is child focused and family-centred. It is undertaken collaboratively with the child or young person, their family and their network. The purpose of the family needs assessment is to gather and analyse information about the child and family's circumstances and behaviour, to determine what help and support a parent requires to meet their child's safety and wellbeing needs.

When undertaking a family needs assessment, explore with the child and their family:

- history and prior experiences
- current circumstances (including the notified concerns) and needs
- strengths and acts of protection.

The use of scaling questions with a child and family can help to create family-led solutions about how best to address the identified needs and facilitate change.

On a scale of zero to ten, where zero is you are feeling totally overwhelmed and unable to cope with the care of your children, and 10 being you are feeling confident, in control and have no concerns with parenting your children, where would you say things are?

What are you already doing or what is already in place that has you this high on the scale?

What would need to happen to bring things up by one?

² Any action taken in response to a notification about an unborn child cannot interfere with the rights or liberties of the pregnant person.

Family support needs domains

The family support needs domains (Table 1), may be used as a framework to guide the family needs assessment, to focus the assessment and to identify the appropriate supports.

Family support need domains				
Child wellbeing	Parenting skills	Social and community support network	Housing, food, clothing, budgeting, basic household resources	Alcohol and drug misuse
Domestic and family violence	Mental or emotional health including depression, anxiety, or self-harm	Physical Health, including health conditions, disability	Cultural connection	Other, including legal support

The family support needs domains support staff to:

- identify the family's current needs that are impacting on the child or are likely to impact the child in the future
- consider how best to target support, to reduce the likelihood of future harm.

The following table provides prompts for staff, to assist with exploring each domain with the child and family, to assess whether support is needed to address the domain (that is, whether it is a family need).

Family support needs domains	Engagement options
Child wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain insight into the child's development and assess whether they are meeting developmental milestones for their age. • Evaluate their engagement in education or training activities. • Understand the child's behaviours in different settings such as home, school and the community. • Be curious about potential factors affecting the child or family. • Explore any mental health or behavioural concerns that may be influencing the child's wellbeing. • Make observations of the child during your visits and make observations of the parents with their children. Are the parents responding appropriately if a child expresses a need and does the child actively seek out the parent for assistance? <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the children have any help at school or home? • Are you aware of any learning or disability needs for your children? • What are your children good at? What do they struggle with? • How do you know when the children aren't feeling well? <p>(refer to practice guide: Physical and cognitive developmental milestones)</p>
Parenting skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to grasp the parent's level of confidence, the skill set they bring to parenting, and their ability to navigate the challenges that come with raising children. • Does the parent have a good understanding of age-appropriate skills to respond to their child? • Explore their methods for responding to and supporting their children's behaviour. • Explore the parent's own childhood experience to determine if any adverse experiences during their childhood might be impacting upon their ability to care for and respond appropriately to their child. • Unpack the parent's perspectives on what proves effective and what doesn't in their parenting approach, shedding light on the reasoning behind their choices and strategies.

Family support needs domains	Engagement options
Parenting skills cont.	<p>Note: When assessing parenting ensure that you are holding fathers to the same high standards as mothers, by asking the same questions of both parents (and expecting them to both know the answers), and by ensuring that your assessment accurately reflects who does what to manage household functioning and children's safety and wellbeing.</p> <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think you do well as a parent? • What do you find difficult? How do you manage when that happens? Who do you talk to? • Who is responsible for the day-to-day care of the children, including who feeds them, cares for them, provides transport, facilitates social connections, helps with homework, provides emotional support, etc.? • Do you have concerns about the children's behaviours? If so, what are they? • How do your children respond if you say no? What are your ideas around discipline?
Social and community support network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand connections and assistance that the family can access. • Consider using an eco-mapping approach to pinpoint significant family relationships and community-based supports. <p>Note: If the family has limited support services available, explore how technology (teams, text) can be used, however consider that isolation from family, social and community supports may also be an element of DFV. This should be part of the assessment.</p> <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In times of stress or challenges related to parenting, who are the people you usually turn to for emotional support? How do these people help you? • Are there any specific activities or events within your community that you find useful for connecting with others? • Can you share a time when you sought advice or guidance from your community regarding a parenting concern? • Are you able to see your friends, family and community supports when you need to? What gets in the way of your connections with others?
Housing, food, clothing, budgeting, basic household resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek insights into the family's housing and economic circumstances, including their income sources and financial management strategies. • Assess the stability of their housing situation and whether it adequately meets their requirements. • While not necessarily classified as homeless, families may encounter housing stability challenges such as affordability, eviction or reliance on emergency or short-term housing. • Explore any employment-related concerns that may impact their economic well-being. <p>Note: These issues may also be affected by economic abuse as a feature of DFV. This should be part of the assessment.</p> <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you concerned about being able to afford the rent/mortgage for your home? • Do you think your home meets your family's needs? • Do you ever go without something you need because you can't afford it? • How are you coping with your everyday bills? • How are budget decisions and contributions made in the home? Do both parents have equal access to the family resources, and if not, why not?
Alcohol and drug misuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach the topic with sensitivity, assuring the family that there is no judgement involved. • Emphasise that the primary focus is to ensure they receive support where needed. • Inquire about the parent's relationship with alcohol and/or other drugs and the impact any use may have on the children. • Seek to understand the extent and history of any use and explore potential underlying factors.

Family support needs domains	Engagement options
Alcohol and drug misuse cont.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss any past experiences with substance use, how they navigated those challenges and identify successful strategies that have worked for them in the past. The goal is to foster an open and non-judgemental dialogue to provide appropriate support. <p>Note: Consider substance use coercion as an element of DFV.</p> <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you feel that sometimes drinking alcohol affects your parenting or your kids? How? Can you tell me about a time when your alcohol consumption was different to now? How does your alcohol or drug use affect your family? (e.g. you run out of money, you get angry when you don't have it, you lose your license) Do any other people who spend time around your children consume alcohol or drugs in a way that impacts you or the family? (keep exploring other family members using the above questions) Have you accessed support services for drug use in the past? Would you consider accessing support again?
Domestic and family violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where there are concerns about DFV, the person experiencing violence should be engaged separately from the person using violence to ensure their safety. Seek insight into the safety and protection of the family and the nature of any DFV. Consider both physical and emotional safety concerns, with a particular emphasis on any immediate issues requiring urgent attention and support. Explore the presence of DFV and the impact on the overall functioning and well-being of the family, including on finances, housing stability, educational and employment access, social and community connections. Throughout the conversation, it's important to ensure that people experiencing violence do not feel blame or shame. Acknowledge the strengths they already possess which have contributed to keeping themselves and their children safe. Also acknowledge that the adult victim may be already engaging in acts of protection and seek to discover what these are. Encourage a supportive and non-judgemental environment that allows for an open discussion about safety concerns and potential strategies for improvement. Ensure that persons using violence are interviewed and held accountable for their violence and its impacts. Accountability includes asking questions about their behaviour, intentions and impact. <p>Prompts for speaking with the person experiencing violence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How are decisions made in the household, and who gets the final say? How is your parenting affected by the person using violence? What happens when you disagree? What are you worried might happen? Has anyone used physical violence or aggression towards others in the home (e.g. punched, slapped, strangled/choked, pushed, shoved, prevented from leaving, thrown things at or near you)? Have you ever been made or pressured to do something you didn't want to do? Have you ever not been "allowed" to do something you wished to do? Who experiences the violence (e.g. children, partner, ex-partner)? What would your friends and family say about your relationship or partner? Why do you think they would think or say that? What do the children do when there are arguments in the house? Have the police ever been involved in relation to a family conflict? Have you or someone else ever needed medical treatment after an assault? Were you able to access medical treatment if you needed to? Have you or your children ever been affected by domestic or family violence? Who are the supportive people in your life? Who are you able to talk to about your experience? How frequently are you able to be in contact with them? Have things been the same for a while, or are you worried that things are getting worse or more serious? Do you have support available for you to access? Have you accessed them in the past?

Family support needs domains	Engagement options
Domestic and family violence cont.	<p>Prompts for speaking with the person using violence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you think I'm talking with you today? Has anything happened recently? • How are things at home/with your partner and children? Can you describe your relationships with them for me? • What do you think your children learn from watching you interact with their mother? • Most couples argue sometimes, so how do you and your partner handle disagreement or conflict? • When you feel upset with your partner or your children, how do you handle your anger? How do you normally act when you get angry? • Do you think people in your family are ever scared of you? • Have you ever said or done something that you later regretted, or that you were embarrassed about afterwards? • Are you ever worried about your behaviour? What worries you most about it? • Have fights in your home ever become physical? Have you ever pushed or hit your partner? Where were the children when that happened? • Have you ever threatened your partner or children? Do you shout at your partner or children? What do you say to them when this happens? • Do you ever get jealous of your partner? Do you ever stop her from seeing friends or family? • What are your hopes and fears as a father, and how is your current behaviour supporting those goals? • What support do you have available to you, in relation to your parenting? Do you have family or friends that you could turn to? • Are you happy with how your relationship with your partner and children is going, or would you like some parenting or relationship support? <p>Note: Use language that clarifies the nature of his violence like: 'we are worried about your choice to hit, hurt or control your partner'. Affirm that their violent behaviour is a choice and that they can choose to stop. Name his behaviours when you notice his more subtle tactics of control, manipulation or coercion during engagement.</p> <p>Attention: Practitioners need to be attuned and alert to the presence of domestic and family violence throughout the assessment phase and continue to review the level of risk posed by the person using violence.</p>
Mental or emotional health including depression, anxiety, or self-harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand any potential mental health considerations for the parents, approaching the topic with sensitivity. • Collaborate with the parent to comprehend the influence of their mental health on both their daily life and parenting practices. • Ask about the existing support structures or strategies they employ to manage their mental well-being. • Attempt to identify the network of both formal and informal supports that play a role in their life, recognising the importance of a comprehensive understanding of their mental health context. <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you share any specific challenges or stressors you have been dealing with recently? • How do you typically cope with stress or difficult emotions? Are these strategies helpful for you? • Have you noticed any changes in your mental health lately? • How do you think your mental health affects your parenting and ability to maintain a safe and happy home for your children?
Physical Health, including health conditions, disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a conversation about the physical health of both the parent and the children, as well as any disabilities or factors that may influence the family dynamics. • Address the challenges related to a child's health, understanding that these situations can heighten parental worry and stress. By discussing these aspects openly, the aim is to gain insights into the family's unique circumstances and identify potential areas where additional support may be beneficial.

Family support needs domains	Engagement options
Physical Health, including health conditions, disability cont.	<p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have any of the parents or children been diagnosed with a disability? • Are your children meeting their developmental milestones? • Do any of the parents or children have a NDIS plan? • Does anyone in the family have a medical condition? Do they take regular medication? Is there a plan in place to support them? • Do the children regularly see a GP, clinic or health service?
Cultural connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For First Nations families, ensure that you discuss with a family member their right to have an Independent Person involved in the discussion. • Approach the discussion with sensitivity, acknowledging the historical and transgenerational impact of policies and practices by previous governments and non-government organisations. • Seek to understand the family's connection to their culture, local community, mob and country, respecting the significance of these ties. <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander? • Where is your family from?? • Overall, do you and your family feel connected to your culture? • Do you know of the local cultural services? For example, health, housing and Elders. • Do your kids take part in cultural activities? <p>Note: It is important to recognise that certain aspects of the family's cultural practices, such as men's business or women's business, cultural knowledge or ceremonies may be sensitive and not necessarily appropriate for discussion. Any use of such information should be approved by the family under the re-assurance that the information is confidential and solely employed to explore their access and connection to culture, helping to identify potential sources of familial cultural support. The goal is to engage in a respectful dialogue that honours the family's cultural heritage and traditions.</p>

Gather additional information

In some circumstances it may be necessary to gather additional information from other sources (beyond the child, parent and alleged person responsible) to assess the family's needs. If it is relevant and necessary, seek the information in a consultative and transparent way, with consent wherever possible. Before seeking the information:

- advise the person whom the information relates (and the parent, if the information relates to the child) that you would like to make a request for the information
- be clear about who you will ask for the information, and what information you will be asking for
- help the person understand why the information is necessary for the purposes of the assessment and how it will be used.

Circumstances when it may be necessary to gather additional information include:

- needing to clarify contradictory information or to validate information
- needing further information from a school or child care about a child's development, attendance or behaviour
- understanding previous interventions, to help inform subsequent referrals.

Involvement of a safety and support network

A child or parent may identify other family or community members during the family needs assessment as people who provide help and support to keep the child safe. In these circumstances, seek to involve them in the family needs assessment with the parent's agreement.

Coordinating support to address needs

During the needs assessment process, identify the key resources, supports and services that will be necessary to help the family address the identified needs. To do this:

- reach a mutual understanding of most pressing needs with the family (these will be the needs that present the greatest risk to the child, and may result in harm in the future, if nothing changes)
- prioritise what needs should be focused on to resolve the concerns
- find solutions to immediate presenting issues
- provide advice, guidance, and targeted support
- build and strengthen the safety and support network

It is important to note that referring a family to a different service or professional for each problem or trying to address all problems simultaneously will likely be overwhelming for the family and ineffective.

Remember that a parent's willingness to accept help and support or their meaningful engagement with support services is a strength, not an act of protection. Risk to a child is reduced through changes in parent behaviour. If there has been no change in parent behaviour, the child may be experiencing or at risk of experiencing cumulative harm.

For further information identifying and making referrals for support, refer to the practice guide [Offer support to the family](#).

Provide the assessment to the service

When a referral is made for support following a family needs assessment, ensure the referral contains adequate details of the family needs assessment including:

- each of the family needs domains identified and how these are impacting on family functioning
- the impact of parental behaviour or inaction on the child.

This will help the service provider to provide targeted support, to help the family address the needs.

Respond to additional risk for a child

As child protection practitioners, we always pay attention to risk and stay open-minded when completing assessments. The decision to respond to the notification as a standard response is a point-in-time decision, based on the child protection history and the notified concerns.

As we move through the assessment process and grow our understanding of the family's functioning through our engagement, observations, interactions and information gathering, we may become concerned about additional risk to the child that was not known at intake, prompting us to reconsider the original decision about the response to the notification. If at any time during the assessment there is increased concern for a child's safety and wellbeing, discuss this with the senior team leader who will decide if the assessment requires an escalation to a priority response.

It is important to note that:

- The intent of the standard response is to reduce the likelihood of the child becoming a child in need of protection. The family needs assessment is about addressing the factors within the family that create risk for the child. In this respect, we are also focused on risk.
- The SDM safety assessment helps us to identify whether a child is in immediate danger of serious harm. A 'safe' safety assessment outcome does not mean that a child is not at ongoing risk of harm. Assessments that only focus on immediate danger may leave a child at risk of experiencing harm, including cumulative harm.

Record the assessment

Table 2 (below) provides a suggested template to document the family needs assessment, including the support a family requires to address the identified needs.

Family support needs identified	What is your assessment of this need <i>(include an analysis of Information provided by child/family during the assessment/ any other information gathered)</i>	Support required	Who is best placed to provide this support	Action <i>(e.g. Referral completed for Mother to DV connect on 12/05/2021 – service confirmed receipt and have made initial contact)</i>

Table 2

A well-documented standard response clearly and succinctly:

- captures the relevant information used to inform the assessment of needs, including
 - the safety assessment
 - information gathered from children, parents and family
 - information obtained from other sources.
- captures the information that was relied on to inform the assessment of the child and family's need/s, including the source of that information
- articulates the needs identified within the family, including how the child has been impacted or may be impacted in the future, if nothing changes
- demonstrates a clear link between the risk to the child/family need and the support coordination – providing a rationale about how the referrals for support are appropriate for addressing the identified need within the family, if referrals were completed (assessed, referred and closed outcome)
- articulates a rationale for why support coordination was not necessary, including in circumstances where needs were identified, but the parent did not consent to the referral (assessed and close outcome).

Most critically, the assessment needs to be able to be read and understood by others in the future.

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